



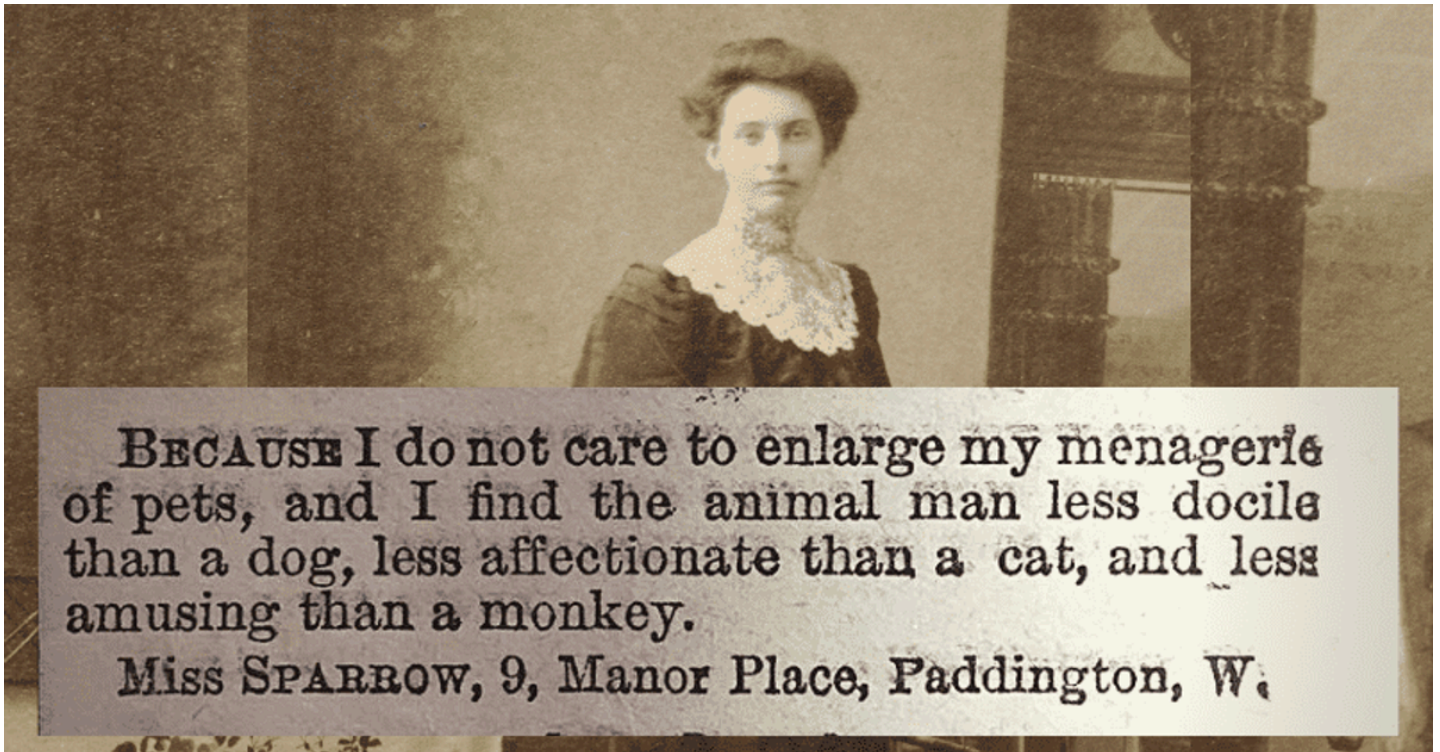
# 1889 magazine asked Victorian women why they were single and unmarried — their responses were badass

Victorian-era humor and women's rights intersect in witty 1889 Tit-Bits magazine competition.

By Jisha Joseph

(//WEB.ARCHIVE.ORG/WEB/20250628232421/HTTPS://SCOOP.UPWORTHY.COM/WRITER/JISHA-JOSEPH)

November 24, 2024



Representative Cover Image Source: Getty Images | FocusOnYou; X | @DigiVictorian

Historian Dr. Bob Nicholson, who runs the blog The Digital Victorianist, discovered an intriguing segment titled "The Spinsters' Prize" in an 1889 edition of Tit-Bits Magazine. This competition rewarded unmarried women for the best answers to why they hadn't found a husband yet. The responses, published on April 27, 1889, reveal that Victorian women had a sharp and humorous wit.



"I'm a historian who specializes in the history of Victorian pop culture," Dr. Nicholson told Bored Panda (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://www.boredpanda.com/victorian-magazine-women-reasons-single-spinsters/>). "I was searching through old issues of Tit-Bits magazine in search of nineteenth-century jokes, and I happened across the 'Why am I a Spinster?' competition by accident. I love finding evidence that challenges our assumptions about life in the nineteenth century. Some people imagine Victorian women to have been prudish, reserved, and submissive to men—but many of the 'spinsters' who entered that competition were anything but. They were witty, irreverent, and proudly independent. I thought that was worth sharing."

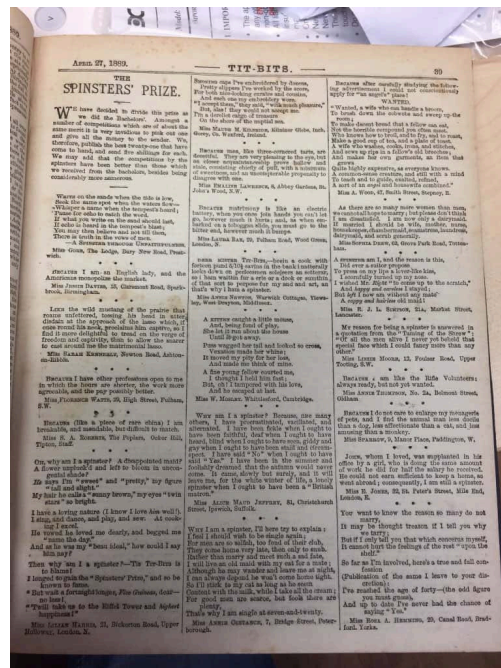


Image Source: Twitter/Dr. Bob Nicholson  
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Dr. Nicholson shared his findings in an X

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://twitter.com/DigiVictorian/status/964842367508516864>) thread that soon went viral. "I'm not sure I'd go so far as to call the article progressive, but it does a good job of subverting the jokes that were usually told at women's expense," the historian added, explaining that 'spinster' jokes of the time typically presented unmarried women as either desperate to find a man or spiteful that they'd been left on the shelf. "There are hints of these misogynistic stereotypes in the Tit-Bits' article, but they also give a voice to women who comically assert their happiness at being single, and use the chance to mock men. This wasn't unheard of in Victorian humor, but it does go against the grain."

One of the reasons I enjoyed the witty, self-confident responses to Tit-Bits' competition is that Victorian depictions of spinsters were usually the exact opposite. Take this joke from Answers magazine (1891), for instance...

[pic.twitter.com/EcA02fZqAE](https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://t.co/EcA02fZqAE) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://t.co/EcA02fZqAE>)

— Dr Bob Nicholson (@DigiVictorian) August 30, 2018

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"Tit-Bits ran their competition at a time when the so-called 'woman question' was becoming increasingly debated in Victorian society," Dr. Nicholson said. "Many women were beginning to push for more rights and opportunities, including the right to be defined by more than just their marriage. I think the responses Tit-Bits received—and the fact that they printed them—hints at these changing attitudes."

**Here are some of our favorite entries to the "Why am I a Spinster?" competition:**

1.

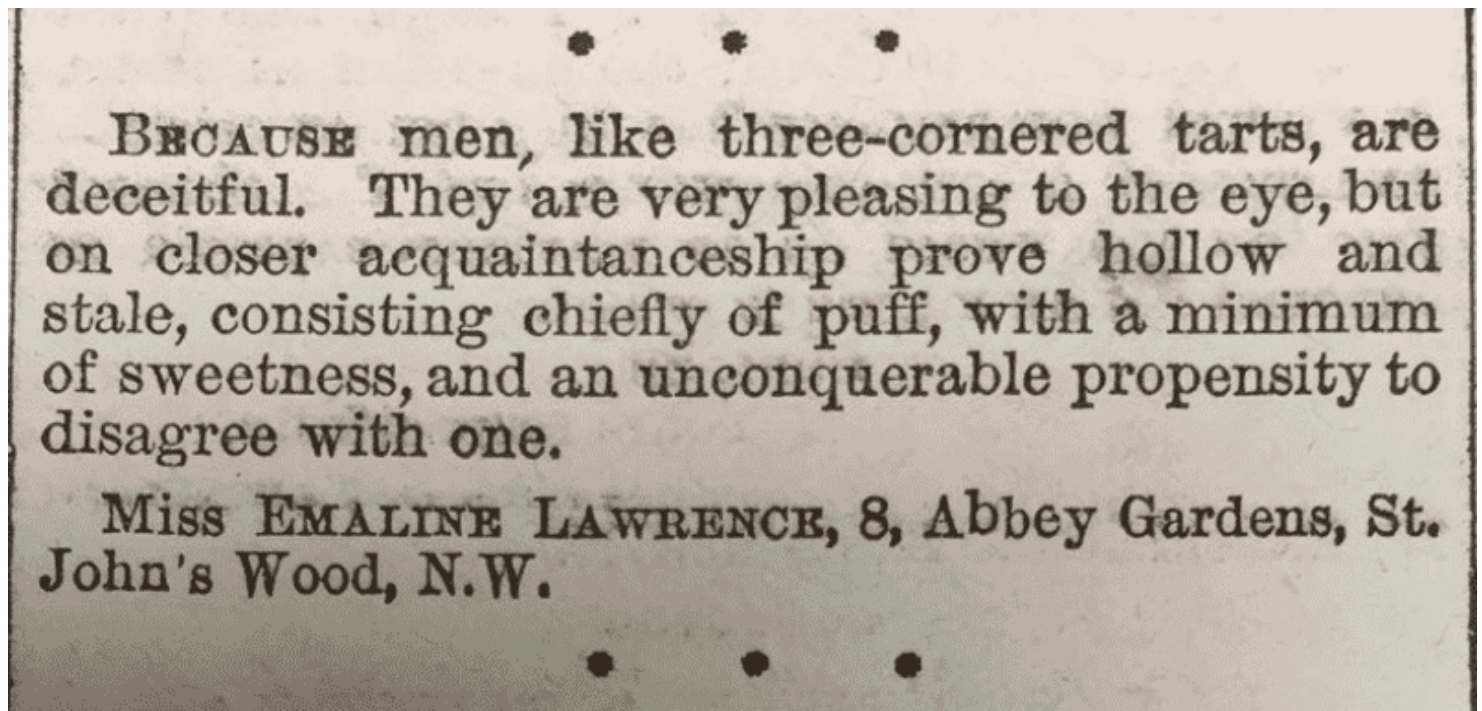


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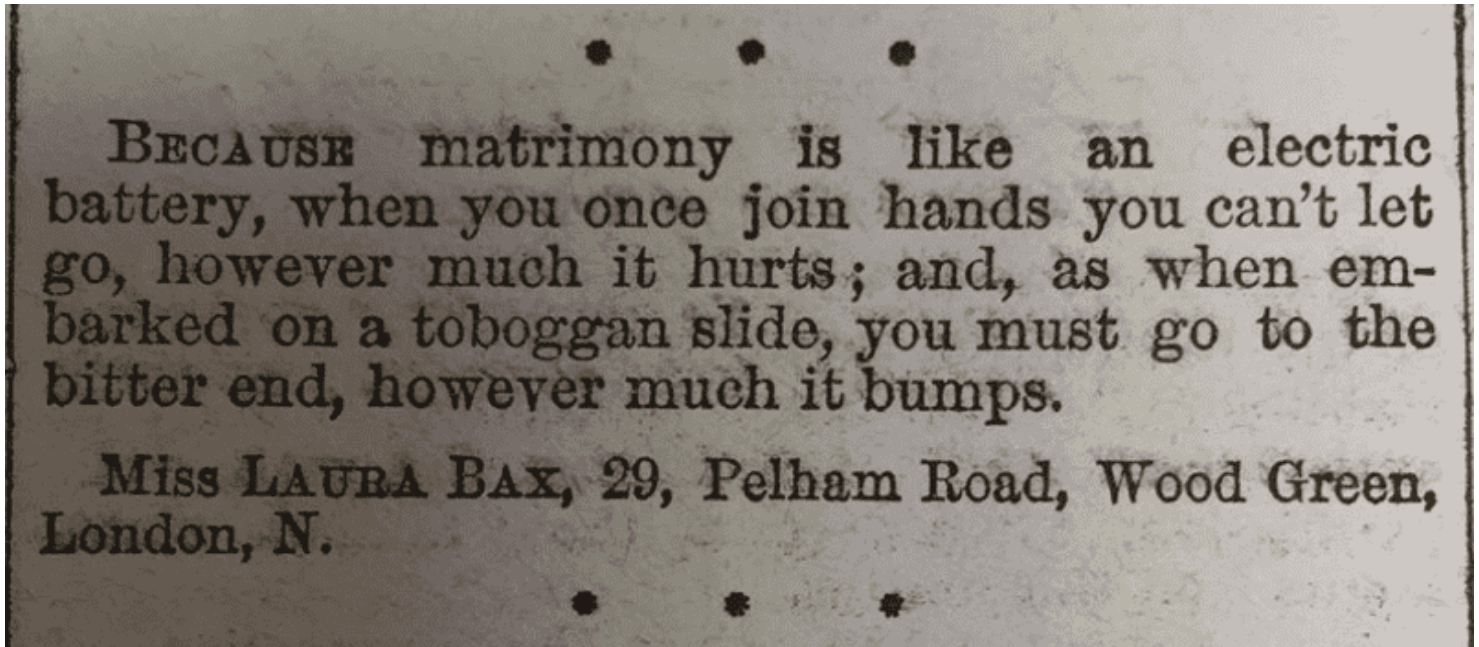


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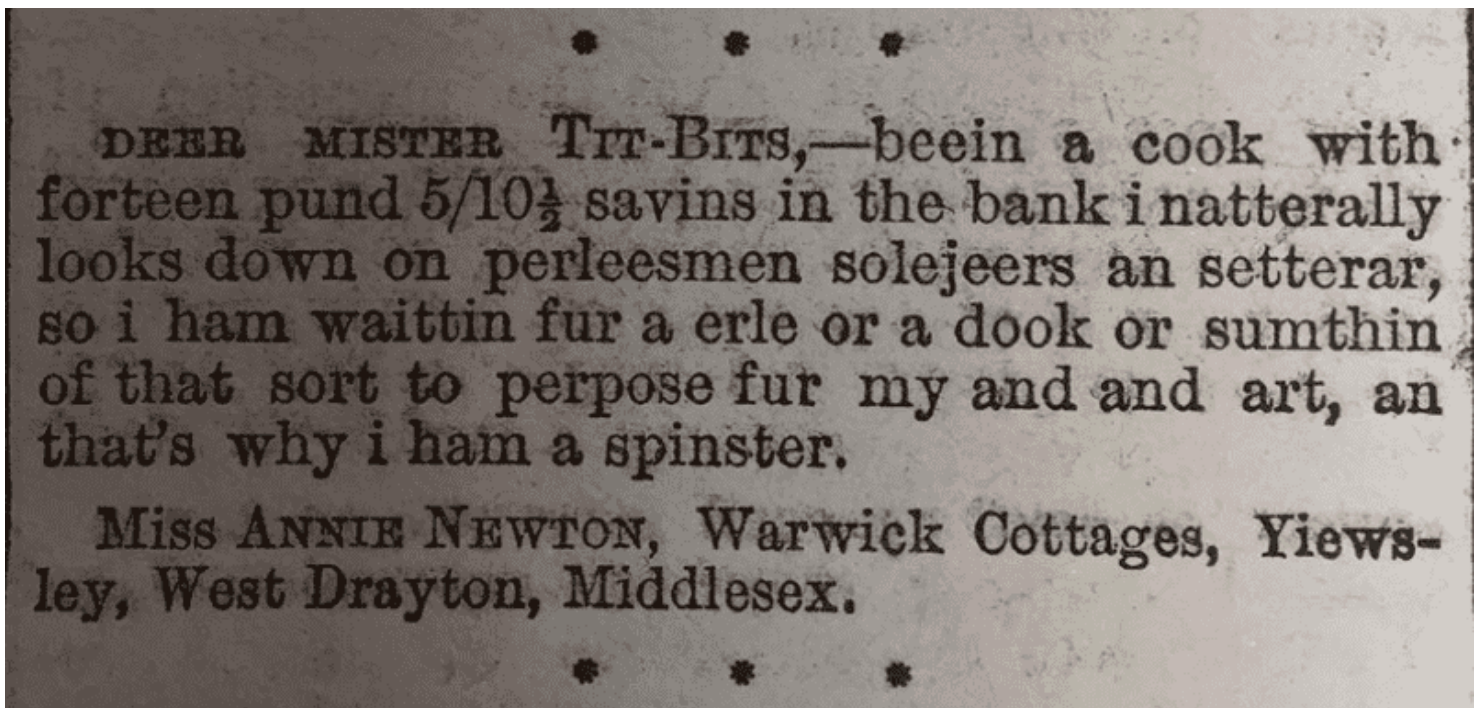


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4.

BECAUSE I am an English lady, and the Americans monopolize the market.

Miss JESSIE DAVIES, 16, Claremont Road, Sparkbrook, Birmingham.

Image Source: Twitter/Dr. Bob Nicholson (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://twitter.com/DigiVictorian/status/964842367508516864>)

5.

LIKE the wild mustang of the prairie that roams unfettered, tossing his head in utter disdain at the approach of the lasso which, if once round his neck, proclaims him captive, so I find it more delightful to tread on the verge of freedom and captivity, than to allow the snarer to cast around me the matrimonial lasso.

Miss SARAH KENNERLY, Newton Road, Ashton-on-Ribble.

Image Source: Twitter/Dr. Bob Nicholson (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://twitter.com/DigiVictorian/status/964842367508516864>)



6.

BECAUSE I have other professions open to me in which the hours are shorter, the work more agreeable, and the pay possibly better.

Miss FLORENCE WATTS, 29, High Street, Fulham, S.W.

Image Source: Twitter/Dr. Bob Nicholson (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://twitter.com/DigiVictorian/status/964842367508516864>)

7.

BECAUSE (like a piece of rare china) I am breakable, and mendable, but difficult to match.

Miss S. A. ROBERTS, The Poplars, Ocker Hill, Tipton, Staff.

Image Source: Twitter/Dr. Bob Nicholson (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://twitter.com/DigiVictorian/status/964842367508516864>)

8.

My reason for being a spinster is answered in a quotation from the "Taming of the Shrew": "Of all the men alive I never yet beheld that special face which I could fancy more than any other."

Miss LIZZIE MOORE, 12, Foulser Road, Upper Tooting, S.W.

Image Source: Twitter/Dr. Bob Nicholson (<https://web.archive.org/web/20250628232421/https://twitter.com/DigiVictorian/status/964842367508516864>)



9.

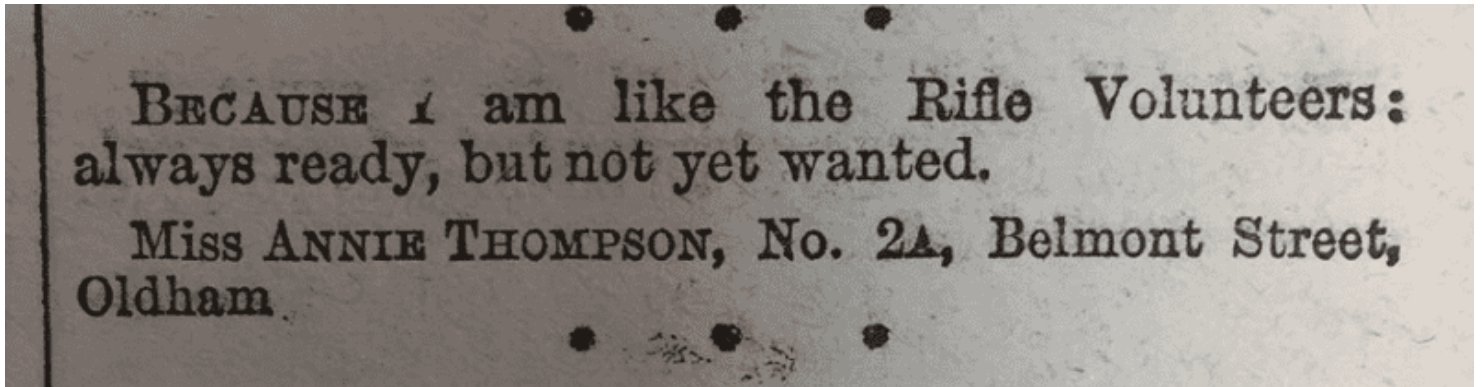


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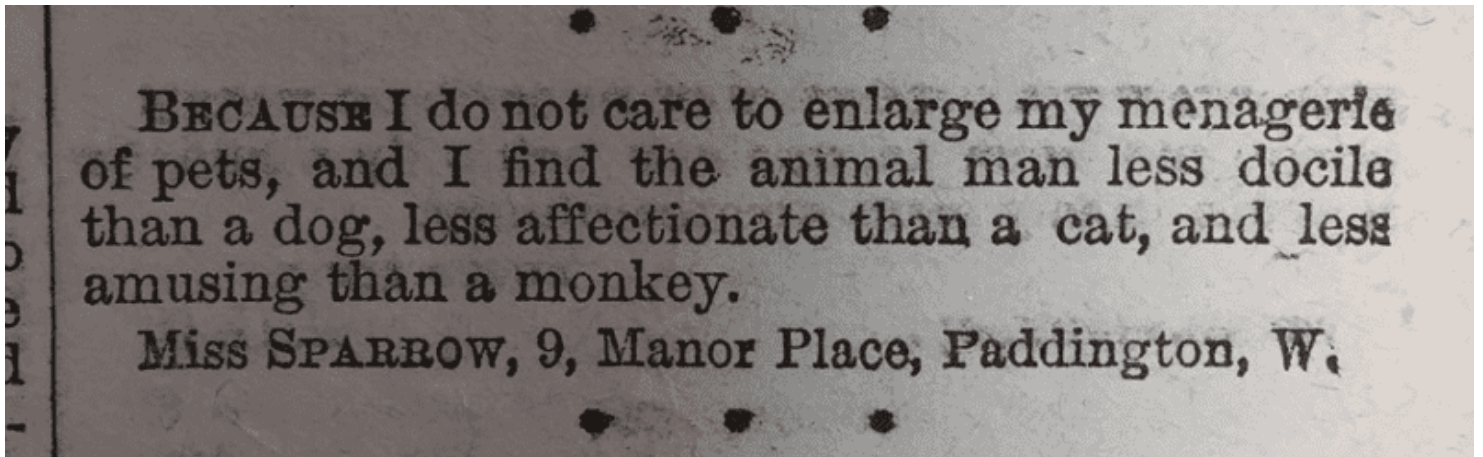


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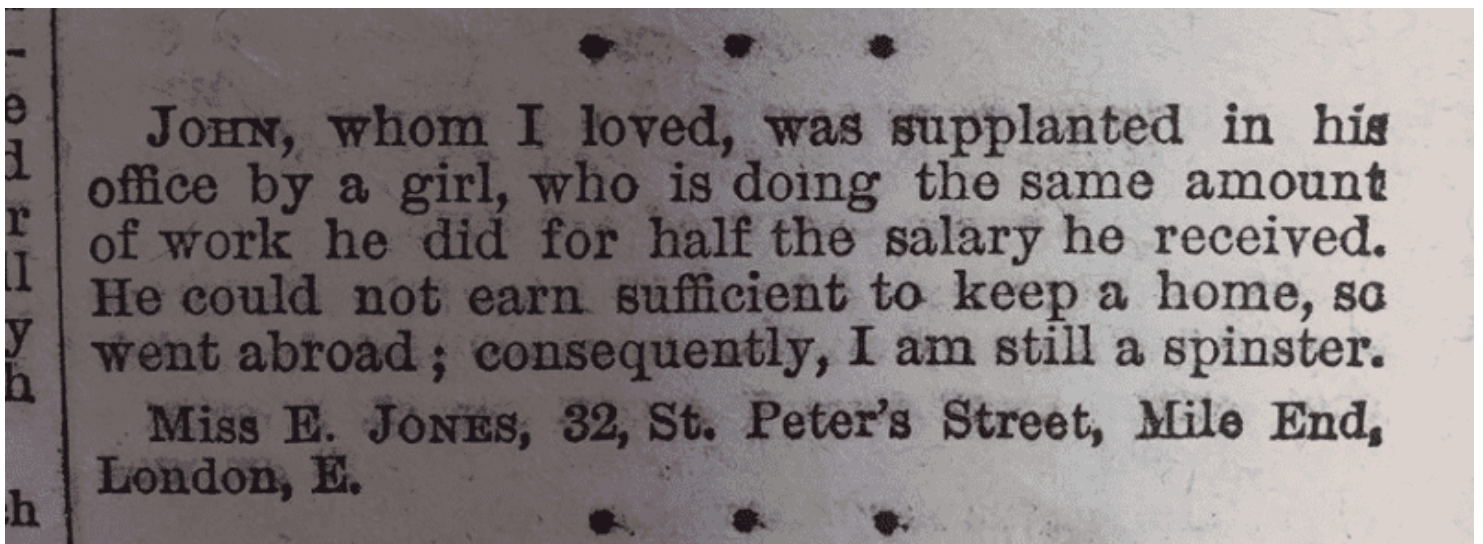


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*This article originally appeared 2 years ago.*



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